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J. F. K. Remembered,
Even for Those Who Don't

By DOUGLAS COUPLAND

WHEN I THINK OF JOHN Fitzgerald Kennedy, I think of those glossy black polyvinyl chloride J. F. K. hairdos that the band Devo used to wear in the early 1980's — a shining example of modern chemistry unifying a motley cluster of Ohio nerds into a chorus of ironic funsters.

Or maybe I think of Andy Warhol's funeral silkscreens of Jacqueline Kennedy — all blue, flat, sterile and repetitive. Perhaps I remember the paranoia of Oliver Stone's movie, "J. F. K." Or perhaps I think of John Kennedy Jr. and Daryl Hannah on the cover of People magazine. I might even think of the

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passages about John Kennedy in Norman Mailer's somewhat saucy book "Marilyn."

But when I think of John Kennedy, I, like most people, tend to think primarily of the assassination. Certain Americans are remembered on their birthdays — Martin Luther King, George Washington and Abe Lincoln — but John Kennedy is almost alone in being remembered on the day he was killed. And while a group of people currently in their mid-30's and upward seems certain to turn

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A 1952 image of John F. Kennedy from the CBS documentary "Jack," to be broadcast on Thursday—The future sex President? The backache President?

CBS



Cherry Wynfield, left, Patrick Dempsey as John Kennedy and Nancy McClure in "J. F. K.: Reckless Youth"—Historical fragments for the memory-free?

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the forthcoming 30th anniversary of the assassination, on Nov. 22, into a "Where-were-you-when-it-happened?"-athon, a more reasonable question for those who are, like myself, younger might be: "Where were you when you first saw the Zapruder film?"

Medio Multimedia, a Redmond, Wash., software company, is offering "The J. F. K. Assassination, a Visual Investigation," which allows owners of CD-ROM interactive computer systems access to five computer-generated views of the Kennedy assassination, each view tracing the trajectory of bullets as postulated by the Warren Report, the House Select Report and three other theories. The animation is a digitalization of the Zapruder film. It gives hard-core conspiracy theorists access to a long-cherished dream, to actually enter the Zapruder film.

The networks will all — with the surprising exception of Fox Television — be performing a similar enter-the-dream function over the next few weeks. Their offerings — trotted out in a mood that might echo the rote rehashing of an anniversary of Tupperware or Barbie — operate on various levels, from sentimental desperation for a narrative to a frosty, speaks-for-itself documentary gaze.

Witness NBC's "Fatal Deception: Mrs. Lee Harvey Oswald," tomorrow night. Helena Bonham Carter plays Marina Oswald before, during and after the assassination. The Merchant-Ivory-based actress forges ahead bravely in a role that essentially screams "Valerie Bertinelli." (Dedicated viewers could pair this with "Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald?," a nonfiction portrait of the assassin on PBS the following night.)

Next Sunday and Nov. 23, ABC will offer a four-hour dramatization of Nigel Hamilton's

"J. F. K. — Reckless Youth," last year's biography covering the President's first 29 years, which rankled some critics for portraying Rose Kennedy as dotty and the patriarch Joe as an ogre.

And Wednesday night on CBS there will be "Jack," a documentary compiled from home movies and news footage — two hours of extinct black-and-white and color film stock. It's a Bruce Weber-like spree of suntans, flapping canvas, Foster Grant sunglasses, foamy beaches, bristly necks and blue skies. (An added bonus: the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates look just like Nirvana's "In Bloom" video on MTV.)

On Friday, there will be a "CBS Reports: Who Killed J. F. K.? The Final Chapter" (Dan Rather on the sixth major investigation of the assassination, which involves another showing of the Zapruder film). Then there is the inevitable round of specials from the news divisions and the talk-show circuit. Larry King has already announced that, next Sunday, he will interview newsmakers about where they were when they heard the news of the assassination.

There will be over a dozen shows in all, covering the usual bases. And just wait — Fox could still surprise us with a Zapruder episode of "The Simpsons." It would certainly be more inventive (and possibly more insightful) than much of what will end up making the 30th anniversary of the event a confusing blur of demographic pornography, targeted at those 35 and older.

Younger people, beware: You will be someone else's memory slave for approximately the next two weeks.

I was a born on a Canadian NATO base in Europe 692 days before the Dealey Plaza assassination. I have no memory of that day in Dallas, although people just a year older than me seem to harbor vague Kennedy memory flashes. I believe I was born on some sort of cusp, on the right-hand side of

the fulcrum that divides the population into Those Who Remember and Those Who Don't.

This fulcrum also seems to be a suspiciously handy marking point for separating out those for whom the notion of post-modernity is an effort and those for whom post-modernity is easy. The simple formula? No J. F. K. memory = a post-modern sensibility.

For the memory-free, J. F. K. becomes one more fragment to be cut and pasted in the scrapbook of personal political identity. His life becomes just as much province of tabloids as history books. Was he the sex President? A genius? The backache President? Is he still alive and hiding in Idaho? And whatever happened to that pillbox hat (a Halston)?

Speaking of that pillbox hat, here's another question. What if there had never been a Zapruder film? Consider that. Without the Zapruder film, there would never have been the visual touchstone for three decades of questions about what really happened. Its 360-or-so crucial frames open the gates to all our other tabloid fears and curiosities. The Zapruder film allows people to ruminate long past the point after which there is nothing left to say.

Post-modernists would say that without the Zapruder film there would never have been a rock group called the Dead Kennedys, no plastic Devo hairdos and certainly no "J. F. K.," the movie. There would have been no tabloid nonsense about J. F. K. and Marilyn, about J. F. K. and aliens.

Without the assassination — more importantly, without its subsequent showings on television and the photo spreads in Life magazine, without the endless relooping of the

Perhaps Fox will surprise us with a Zapruder episode of 'The Simpsons.' Now that would be inventive.

Zapruder film in the collective brain — the Kennedy Administration would today be considered in the same calm tones reserved for the Johnson Administration. Without all that, the honor of becoming the first President tinged with post-modernity would have, quite rightly, gone instead to Ronald Reagan.

But whereas the Reagan Administration was almost entirely post-modern, based as it was on cynically simulated behavior and the ironic divorce of statement from content, the Kennedy Administration was largely Pop. Perhaps it was the only true Pop administration. Everything the Kennedy family (with its TV star looks and its four-member, consumer-perfect configuration) touched turned to Pop: the Bay of Pigs crisis, astronauts, the Berlin Wall, sailboats, Hyannisport and, of course, hair. Somehow, under Kennedy, it all became a painting by Rauschenberg, Rosenquist or, (of course) Warhol. Or at least so it

seems for someone like myself who wasn't actually there.

The inherent Pop-ness of the Kennedy Administration makes critical analysis of it difficult and for future generations, maybe even impossible. History will probably know with some degree of empirical precision what sorts of Presidents Lyndon Johnson or Jimmy Carter were, but J. F. K. can only be a screen onto which post-modernist citizens project their own notions of what a President can (and will) be. Yet to think of the era from which he comes is to think of a pre cut-and-paste time, a time when cultural unity

was not a sentimental impossibility.

Will I watch any of the forthcoming tele-shenanigans? Oh, probably. No doubt you'll find me guiltily glued to whatever package gives the highest amount of Super-8 footage containing those Foster Grant sunglasses and white canvas luffing in the Massachusetts wind. Like most people who look at John Kennedy long after he himself vanished into a twilight zone of fame, I find myself across all these years wanting to ride on those sailboats — needing to see those clear blue skies — and trying to imagine what it was like to have been *there*. □

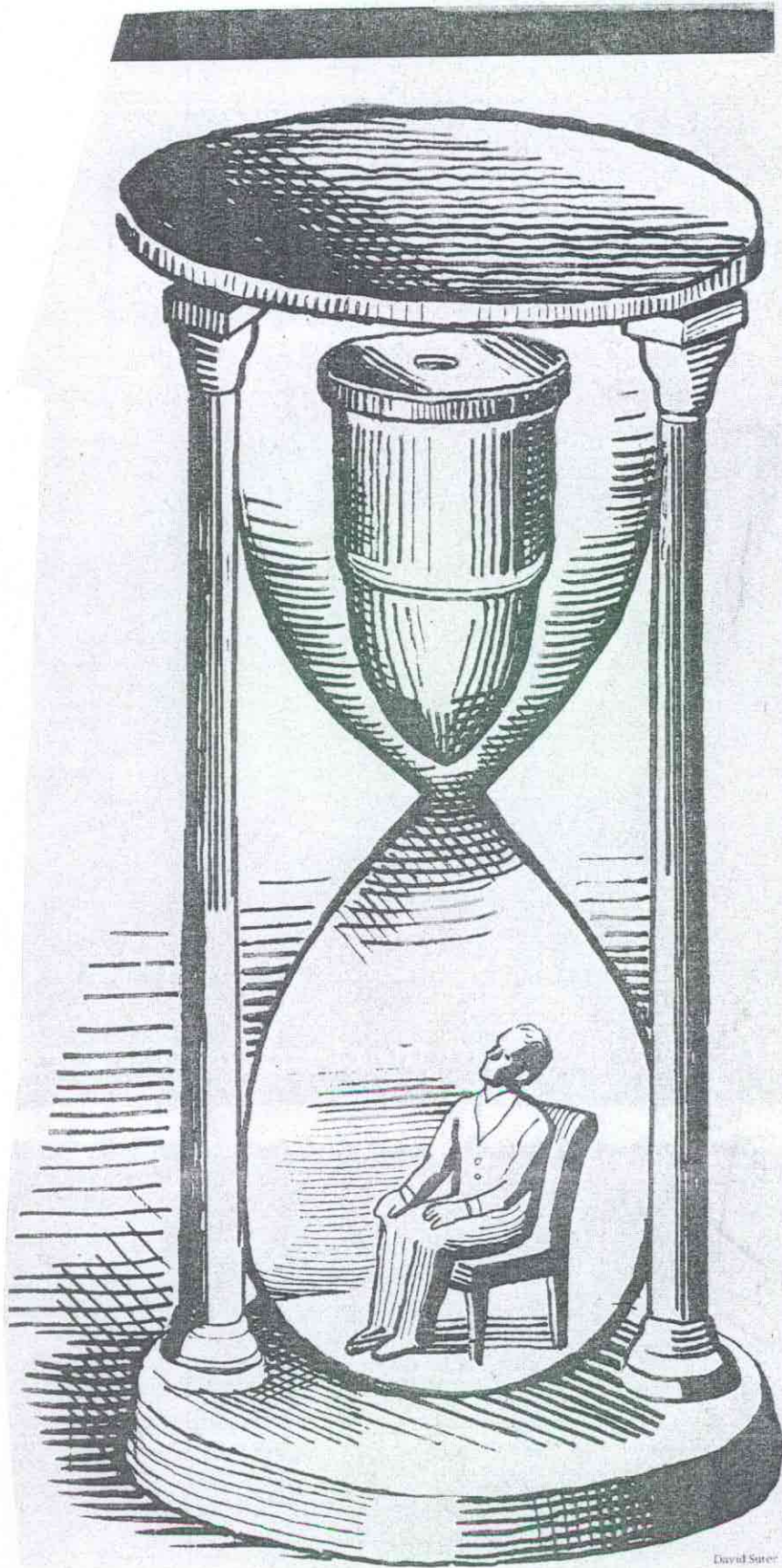
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TELEVISION

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